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What is 'the Problem' of Singleness?

by Jan Macvarish
University of Kent, Canterbury

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Abstract

Over the past 30 years there has been a considerable increase in the number of people living alone; in the UK, the proportion of one-person households almost doubled between 1971 and 2000, rising from 17% to 31% of households (ONS, 2002). The research drawn on here explores the experience and representation of a rapidly growing sub-group of one-person households identified by Hall et al (1999) as female, metropolitan, managerial/professional, educated and mobile. The paper concentrates on questions surrounding the identity of those who have been termed the 'new single women' (Whitehead, 2003). In much of the specific 'single women' literature, the 'problem' of the single woman has been understood as residing in her social construction; her stigmatisation and marginalisation as an 'other', relative to the norms of heterosexual partnership and motherhood. It is argued here that significant contextual changes in the landscape of interpersonal relationships demand a reconsideration of the way in which singleness is understood sociologically.

The paper draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in London and the South-East with a small sample of women (15) fitting the characteristics identified by Hall et al. They were aged 34-50, never-married[1], currently lived alone, were not in a relationship and had never had children. All who volunteered for interview were heterosexual. The women were recruited using a snowball method with the reasoning that 'word-of-mouth' would recruit a more varied range of individuals than might respond to a public call for those who self-identified as 'single' to come forward. Part of the interview schedule was constructed to elicit information concerning how the women negotiated their identity and the way in which they related themselves to the category of 'single woman'. The women were asked how they defined themselves, what they thought of the term spinster, and when they felt their singleness mattered (to themselves and to other people). They were also asked about their relationship and employment history, their daily lives and their future plans.

Keywords: Single Woman, Singleness, One-Person Households, Identity, Social Construction, Interpersonal Relationships, Family, Childless

Introduction

1.1 The increase in women living alone during what could be termed ‘the family years’ has been discussed by academics and commentators and has been reflected in cultural representations of the phenomenon in literature, film and television. It is widely acknowledged that today’s single woman, real and imagined, is a very different creature to the stereotyped ‘spinsters’ and ‘old maids’ of the past. By comparing the most recent cultural representations and public discussion of singleness with the lived experience of the single women interviewed, it is hoped that light can be shed on what J. Lewis has called the, ‘iterative process between the actors making choices and their external environments.’ (Lewis, 2005: 44)

1.2 Sociological discussion of single women has undergone significant developments in the past 20 years. Early discussion took place in US academic literature (Stein, 1981), particularly amongst demographers (Goldscheider and Waite, 1993; Santi, 1988). The rise in single-person households entered the politically-charged US discussion of family change, where it was argued that they were an indicator of ‘excessive

individualism' (Popenoe, 1996; Bellah et al, 1985). In contrast, feminist-inspired 'empowerment' literature welcomed the increasing number of single women as a sign that women's choices had increased while challenging the distorted representation of singleness that persisted. Historical portraits of past single women and descriptive interviews with single women whose lives were lived during different periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were typical of the earlier feminist contribution and provide useful points of comparison with contemporary data (Byrne, 2003; Clements, 1999; Gordon, 1994; Allen, 1989; Jeffreys, 1985; Adams, 1976).

1.3 In the UK, single women have been discussed within family and household change literature (McRae, 1999), by urban geographers Hall, Ogden and Hill, (1997, 1999 and 2000) and by statistician/demographer John Haskey (1988, 1995 and 1996). Significant European contributions to the body of knowledge have included Kaufmann's extensive demographic portrait (1994) and Bien et al's research into the social networks of single people (1992). Key contributions to the theoretical discussion have been made by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002and 1995), Bauman (2001) and Giddens (1991 and 1992), who have treated the contemporary single woman as emblematic of major social trends typical of late-stage capitalism. Recently, a more grounded discussion has emerged from data collected in the UK through in-depth interviews with single people in diverse circumstances. Roseneil and Budgeon's (2004) research into the social networks of single people, Jamieson et al's (2003) research amongst younger single people, Reynolds and Wetherall's (2003) work with data from a sample very similar in profile to this study and Simpson's (2003) study of women in more varied circumstances all provide fertile ground for a discussion about the meaning and experience of contemporary singleness.

1.4 Much of the literature about single women has been concerned with challenging the construction of the single woman as antithetical to feminine norms. According to Sandfield and Percy (2003) stigmatization and marginalization are still the defining features of single womanhood:

> 'Traditional discourses of the female life plot cast heterosexual romance and marriage as the ultimate success…obscure(s) women's agency and selfhood beyond heterosexual relationships…constitutes an obstacle to unmarried women's acceptance of their lifestyles as valid…ignores the possibility that women might positively choose to remain unmarried and contributes to cultural images of the unmarried woman as desperate and flawed' (Sandfield and Percy, 2003: 476).

1.5 Reynolds and Wetherall also argue that 'the privileging of marriage and long-term partnerships contributes to the marginalisation of single women' (Reynolds and Wetherall 2003: 489). However, it is more widely assumed in the sociological literature that there has been an 'erosion of the traditional family model' (Lewis, 2005:40), whereby the norms which elevated marriage and motherhood have been challenged both ideologically and behaviourally in recent years. It might be predicted that a welcome effect of the destabilizing of traditional family-based identities would be a strengthening of previously marginalized ones. However, Jane Lewis argues that the 'possibility of more choice' has 'been accompanied by greater uncertainty' (Lewis, 2005:40). The increase in single living has occurred in the context of what Lasch called 'a thorough-going disenchantment with personal relations' (Lasch, 1979: 383). While the increasing media exposure of intimate life can give the appearance of a cultural obsession with love, sex, coupledom and parenthood, these are often particularly jaundiced portrayals of the interpersonal sphere. Stories of 'singletons' enjoying new freedoms therefore run alongside an abundance of revelations of abuse within intimate relationships and an overwhelming emphasis in policy, culture and the media on the dysfunctions of family life. One manifestation of this can be found in the UK non-fiction book charts which tend to include many 'memoirs' of survivors of horrendous family abuse, such as Dave Pelzer's 'A Boy Called It', Constance Briscoe's 'Ugly' or Jenny Tomlin's 'Behind Closed Doors' (*Sunday Times*, 11 June 2007).

1.6 It is argued here that contemporary singleness is better understood by recognising the cultural shift away from the privileging of particular norms of private life and towards the individualization of the meanings attached to intimate relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The data produced by this research calls into question the 'stigmatisation' framework but also provides evidence that single women still experience a disjuncture between the identities publicly available to them and how they make sense of their own lives. The interviews provide evidence that the new identities available to single women, while apparently more positive than the spinster of old, still fail fully to capture real women's lives and concerns.

1.7 That increasing rates of single living have come about in the context of powerful changes in ideas about family life, love and romance, may help to explain the symbolic importance lent to the 'new single woman' and the often contradictory meanings attached to her in the media and popular culture. Stories about single women who 'leave it too late' to have children or who risk becoming 'dangerously like men' in their lifestyle choices (casual sex, heavy alcohol consumption, materialistic desires) are nothing new in the historical pathologisation of single womanhood, but in the past decade they have been countered by numerous defences of singleness. These make claims, for example, that women are at their best when alone or with their 'girlfriends', or that a woman's sense of self is diminished rather than achieved through relationships with men. Self-help books aimed at single women exemplify the thinking that singleness provides an opportunity for self-development. Consciously relishing solo-living is encouraged as a more certain and less risky path to self-actualisation than finding a mate, in fact, being comfortable alone is often portrayed as a prerequisite to finding a suitable partner; 'loving yourself' is the first step to being loved by another. As described by Reynolds and Wetherall, this thinking offers 'a politics of self-acceptance, self-transformation and self-actualization' (Reynolds and Wetherall, 2003: 491) and provides one of the few 'positive' identities available for single women. However, the data from the present study illustrate that this idealization fails to offer a convincing presentation of contemporary singleness.

1.8 In most popular cultural representations, the benefits of the single life are usually conjured up in a

lightweight or a commercial context. Single pleasures are generally banal, such as being in bed alone with a tub of ice-cream, giggling with 'girlfriends', having time to 'pamper' oneself or even having sole control of the television remote control. Images of single women reveling in their 'individual space' make sense when contrasted to the domestic demands of an unlovable husband or ungrateful children. They may also appeal to younger women who might aspire to independence from parental control or to greater privacy than is afforded by shared housing and for whom living alone has become an important life-stage. Miranda Lewis's (2005) report found that single women draw satisfaction and pride from living alone. The report suggests that for younger women, living alone can be constructed as a positive statement of emotional, financial and domestic independence (primarily from parents). Being single during the twenties and early thirties is assumed to be a temporary life-stage, prior to 'settling down' with a partner and perhaps having children. At this stage, the 'single girl' identity poses living alone as an opportunity to 'find out who you really are' prior to getting seriously entangled with a partner. It was found that in contrast to single men, single women reported experiencing 'a sense of achievement' from living alone and felt that solo-living boosted their self-esteem (Lewis, M. 2005: 22), suggesting that they are aware of the new cultural affirmation of single living. Schmitz-Koester makes an important distinction between the ways in which singleness is experienced by different age-groups of women and argues that the 'single lifestyle' idealization may not be meaningful for certain women:

> 'The solo-existence is by no means the lifestyle choice of thirty-something women…This lifestyle is primarily chosen by women who are in search of something, who are experimenting with life's possibilities. And these women tend to be either the very young or the women of post-childbearing age, women who have finally found the strength to make themselves the centre of attention. If it didn't more or less reinforce conservative pro-family ideology, one could almost say that the single lifestyle is the lifestyle of women in the pre and post family phase.' (Schmitz-Koester, 1993 translated in Berg-Cross, 2004:43).

1.9 For the women studied in this sample (aged 34-50), singleness is more problematic than the popular portrayals suggest, primarily because they would not want it to be permanent but they cannot be certain when, how or if it will end. The respondents were familiar with the affirmative meanings attached to contemporary singleness and spoke of being free to do 'what they liked, when they liked' and of the simplicity and security of the single life relative to the risks of dating or the perceived burdens of motherhood. However, these descriptions offer a one-sided representation. One 38 year old expressed the multiple levels at which her single-living was experienced:

> 'Sometimes I'm so glad to come home at the end of the day, shut my door and think, I do not have to deal with another human being if I don't want to. And that is actually a luxury. Especially when I've spent a weekend with friends with children and I think, my god, what a struggle, constant noise, constant demands, no time for yourself, and you kind of come back home and it's just nice. But then I think, I wouldn't have any regrets if a child took up all my time because I've done the traveling and you know, and I've got a career, so I would never resent a little person taking every, you know, I'm ready, you know, to be that person.'

1.10 The contradiction between the pleasures of freedom from responsibility and domestic demands and the pain of being unexpectedly childless and alone is not resolvable, according to this woman, by pure volition, as she struggles to see opportunities to exit her singleness. These profound dilemmas are not supportive of the representation of solo-living as a straightforward lifestyle choice. The serious aspects of adapting to the possibility of long-term or permanent singleness weighed heavily on the shoulders of many of the women. Another respondent spoke of how contemporary representations of singleness are 'really underplaying how difficult it is to be single. I enjoy a lot about being single but there's a lot I hate about being single'. For this respondent, the path to mid-life singleness had been very difficult, including a long-term affair with a married man that ended with him remaining with his wife, a reluctantly terminated pregnancy and an unsuccessful attempt at adoption. These kinds of difficulties cannot be captured in media portrayals of 'single girls enjoying their freedom', but neither are they susceptible to being used as a positive source of external validation.

1.11 For all the culturally available self-help speak of 'loving yourself', it is clear from the women interviewed that the difficulty of not being loved by another (apart from by parents and friends) is not easily resolved through pseudo-therapeutic exercises. One interviewee described a point in her life when she felt acutely that she was not the 'most important person to anybody'. Although she had come through that particular crisis by accepting that she was 'semi-important to lots of people', she still hoped to form a romantic partnership and had had a glimpse of this possibility in a love affair with a married man. Byrne suggests that the single woman can 'offset' the stigma of singleness by 'demonstrating interest in becoming coupled' (Byrne, 2003: 445). It might be argued that the previously quoted respondent had internalized 'heteronormative' romantic ideals. This reading implies that conveying a continued attachment to romance is more a question of appearances and a submission to the pressure to conform to social norms than reflective of true desires. However, there seemed to be something fundamentally private and internal about the quoted respondent's desire to be loved by another.

1.12 In accord with theories which locate the 'problem of single womanhood' as one of identity, some of the difficulties cited by the respondents as features of being a contemporary single woman were rooted in stereotypes and public misperceptions. The following respondent offered an insight into the interaction between her self-presentation and her awareness of culturally available images of the less 'successful' single.

> 'one thing I do try, and I blame this on Bridget Jones, I try to sound, and this sounds really pathetic because I'm not unhappy with my single state, but I think people feel sorry for you, so if I'm talking to somebody for the first time I try to be really upbeat, which is pathetic.'

1.13 The fear of public exposure as 'sad' or 'desperate' loomed large for many of the women. Another respondent suggested that this could have consequences for her chances of finding a mate:

> 'I wouldn't sort of say, I'm really happy being single…but I'd hate them to see me as single and sad, or single for a very long time, you know, hopeless…That's the other thing as well, because it makes it harder to be natural and just flirt and all the rest of it.'

1.14 This anticipation of pity is a powerful force and the options available to overcome it seemed limited. By asserting that being single is desirable or chosen, they risked being read as someone who has de-prioritised love and emotion in favour of themselves or a career. Nobody felt that this accurately described their life to date; all had been involved in intimate relationships and saw themselves as romantically inclined, even if they had been single for some years. The central dichotomy consisted of needing to present themselves as happy with life as it is, while at the same time appearing open to the possibility of romance. This is a dilemma identified by Reynolds and Wetherall, who observed of their sample, 'how often women appeared to be apologizing for acknowledging a desire for commitment with a partner.' (Reynolds and Wetherall, 2003: 505). This apologetic stance seems to be rooted in the conflict between complex, individual desires and the simplistic publicly available versions of singlehood.

1.15 The diversification of the single category by increasing numbers of divorced, separated or younger non-partnered women has made the older, unmarried, childless woman less conspicuous. However, despite the de-stigmatising and the complication of many aspects of the single identity, there remains a connotation of failure in the cultural meanings attached to prolonged singleness and the interviewees were certainly sensitive to this. The immense popularity of the Bridget Jones phenomenon suggests that the new single woman may not be envied, but she is identified with, almost as an 'everywoman' for our times. Being single beyond a certain age is still seen as undesirable, but the dilemmas voiced by fictional characters considering the prospect of prolonged singleness seem to be widely identified with rather than viewed from afar as the minority concern of a marginalized group of women. As Whelehan argues,

> '…for many reasons a hugely diverse constituency of readers feel that there is a link between Bridget and their own realities, or at least that Bridget says something genuinely new about single life.' (Whelehan, 2002: 21)

1.16 Presumably Bridget Jones's success can be attributed in part to her ability to capture the contradictory aspects of singleness. Amidst the fun of flirting and dating, self-absorption, hanging out with friends and getting very drunk, are moments that seem to have resonated with readers because they capture the darker fears of loneliness as well as confused and ambivalent attitudes towards love, coupledom and motherhood. Bridget's melodramatic vision of herself dying 'fat and alone, and found three weeks later half-eaten by Alsatians' (Fielding, 1996) was spontaneously repeated with some seriousness by a number of the respondents, who related it to their own real experiences of being ill while living alone. These periods of sickness had forced issues of care into sharp relief, for although these were all short-lived, everyday illnesses, they had inspired visions of old age.

1.17 Most of the women interviewed were content to be single in the present, but were anxious when they considered the prospect of this being permanent. As one woman said, 'I do get waves of panic that I will be alone for the rest of my life.' For the never-married woman, the late thirties and forties seemed to be a time of transition when decisions have to be made about whether to accept the possibility of lasting singleness or to change course and accept the risks of the dating scene in order to pursue partnership and/or motherhood. The ambivalences of this transitional period make it difficult for this age-group to embrace singleness as a lifestyle identity, even if they do not see themselves as falling into the category of women, cited by a number of interviewees as identifiable amongst their single friends, who make a project of finding a partner and potential father before it's 'too late'.

1.18 The absence of reconciliation towards permanent singleness, even if they were not currently doing anything to minimise the risk of this, was the main reason given for the universal rejection of the term 'spinster' by the women interviewed. 'Spinster' was seen by the interviewees of this study as having little relevance to the circumstances of the contemporary single woman. None of the women could recall being referred to as a spinster; generally it was held to be a term which would have a devastating effect if applied to themselves, but one which they could not imagine anyone using about them. Spinster connoted permanent singleness caused by not having been chosen by a man. The implication of passivity was anathema to the women interviewed, who, although they did not see themselves as having chosen to be single, did not see themselves as being 'un-choose-able'. They were more likely to attribute their singleness to a dearth of single men than to a dearth of attractiveness or 'marriage potential' on their part, not least because the sheer numbers of single women known to them suggested that there was nothing peculiar about them that could explain their singleness. 'Spinster' was also seen as being irredeemably stigmatised and stigmatising. A spinster was described by the women using terms such as 'dried up', 'bitter', 'ugly' and 'eccentric'. Although it was recognised that the term itself was stigmatising, it was also used as though it reflected a truth about actual single women, primarily in the past, but sometimes in the present. One woman spoke of old-fashioned 'librarian types', another of 'dried-up' single work colleagues. There were no attempts to re-claim and redefine the term.

1.19 Reynolds and Wetherall's interviewees also constructed the spinster as 'pitiable, pathetic and problematic'. Contemporary women's attempts to distance themselves from the spinster of the past are read by Reynolds and Wetherall as evidence that the notion of the spinster 'powerfully shaped their management of their identities' (Reynolds and Wetherall 2003: 498). Another possible reading can be posed. Although the respondents' attempts to distance themselves from 'the spinster' clearly reveal a residual stigma attached to spinsterhood, the fact that this distance could be achieved with some

conviction indicates the shift away from the relevance of the spinster role to twenty-first century thinking and circumstances. There was universal recognition among the interviewees in this study that single women have been stigmatised in the past but also a strong sense that this time has passed. Being single in itself was not a cause of spinsterhood; it was still possible to be spinster-like, but this was attributed to individual outlook rather than to relationship status. In her study of 'contemporary spinsters', Simpson (2003) attempts to re-claim 'spinster' on behalf of single women. She seeks to redefine 'spinster' in contemporary terms, including single mothers along with the never-married and the childless in her definition. But it is difficult to see how reinventing 'spinster' could be made meaningful when the title seems to be so firmly disavowed by single women themselves.

1.20 In contrast to 'spinster', 'single' was seen as a much more neutral and ambiguous term. As one interviewee put it, 'I don't think there is any status to it but I don't think it's such an anti-status thing as it probably was in the past'. The ambiguity of 'single' is useful in that it allows the evasion of stigmatizing meanings and contextualizes the single woman amongst many others living outside traditional family norms, such as divorcees and single parents. Another advantage of the single label is that it has no connotation of how long the singleness has lasted; being single for a long time is not linguistically distinguished from being single in-between relationships. 'Single' therefore has the appeal of obscuring individual histories while revealing something of current status.

1.21 Despite the more neutral connotations of the single identity, evidence emerged from the data of a sensitivity and anxiety to being misunderstood by others. This seemed to stem from the lack of control the women had over the way they were perceived, partly due to culturally available images of single women that they felt were still negative or distorting. However, there was also a sense that because they were ambivalent about their singleness, their lives were still very much open-ended, exemplified by their concerns about the consequences of being negatively perceived for their prospects of finding a partner. This anxiety was sometimes evident in responses which suggested that many of the moments of judgement were generated in their own minds. One of the respondents suggested that single women projected a negative view of singleness onto others:

> 'We are our own worst enemies because we assume that people pity us. In London I don't think it's an issue, just a lifestyle.'

1.22 A more subtle example came out of another woman's discussion of 'smug marrieds', a phrase coined by Bridget Jones.

> 'people in very long term relationships get very judgemental, and more so women actually …they can be the worst critics I think. I think sometimes that they don't know you, and I get the sense that sometimes they're quite smug about it…especially women with pushchairs, they're really smug, 'I'm married and I have children', and you sort of feel they'd just ram the pushchair into your leg.'

1.23 While this respondent may have had direct experience of married friends and acquaintances giving her a hard time for remaining single, it seems unlikely that the 'women with pushchairs' who she did not know would have assumed she was single, let alone be hostile towards her. Later in the interview, she revealed her desire for a child and her fears about the diminishing chances of this still happening. Her own sensitivity came to the fore in this description, which seems metaphorical for her sense of involuntary estrangement from the world of motherhood.

> 'that's what scares me because, I don't know, you don't know if you're fertile now or not, so I could spend the next year being anxious about children but maybe as of a year ago I couldn't. And I think I'd be devastated if I found out, if I had a fertility test, and found out I couldn't, maybe I would move on, I don't know.'

1.24 Her uncertainty about such a profound question with such important consequences seems to be of much greater significance than perceived slights from other people. For many of the women, the degree of discomfort they felt in social encounters where their singleness was exposed in some way seemed directly to reflect their level of satisfaction with and control over their singleness. It was noticeable that the two older, most resolved interviewees, who were certain they would not be having children and were beginning to assume that they may not meet another romantic or sexual partner, spoke less of other people's perceptions.

1.25 Byrne suggests that pursuing a career may be one way to 'off-set' the stigma of singleness, but it is noticeable that in public portrayals the successful single is now quite strongly disassociated from ambition, if not from success, in the world of work. Success often seems accidental rather than strived for. Fictional single women seem effortlessly to maintain glamorous careers while preoccupying themselves with their private lives. This trend in popular culture was noted by Berg-Cross et al in their study of global singleness, 'shows like Ally McBeal depict the sweet and ever suffering single woman, on the career track in body but not it spirit.' (Berg-Cross et al, 2004: 44). In British popular culture, the career woman of the eighties was always a figure as much of ridicule as of admiration. The idea that there has been a 'high price of liberation', most often articulated through the 'myth of having it all' are now firmly established in the discussion of female equality.

1.26 The interviews began with a request for information about the subject's educational and working history. Work was rarely described in vocational terms or identified as capturing or expressing an especially significant part of who they were, even by those who had long-standing careers in a professional field. Many of the women made a point of conveying a detachment from their careers and a sense of flexibility and movement in their work rather than a commitment to a particular career goal. More prevalent

were plans, professed or acted upon, to merge the making of a livable income with a creative sense of self, whether by going freelance, engaging in artistic or craft-type activities or developing self-employment opportunities by offering services such as psychic advice or gardening. This may have ideological roots but may also represent reconciliation to socio-economic reality. A number of the women had experienced redundancy from public sector, service sector and IT jobs. Retrospectively, redundancy was often interpreted as a positive thing, because it had 'forced them to question' the priority they gave to work.

1.27 Only one woman claimed a strong personal attachment to her work. She described her disappointment at the lack of affirmation accorded by others to her work success:

> '…I remember when I met someone, I hadn't seen them for 5 years, and all they wanted to know was had I got married and why hadn't I got married and you just think, gosh, even if I won the Nobel prize it wouldn't be important to people….So I think even if they're not your own kind of markers; my marker would be the day I qualified as an architect, the day I completed my first job on site. But society doesn't let you have those markers…It just makes you feel like a nothing.'

1.28 For the single women of this study, the consequence of the denigration of achievements in the public sphere is that the spotlight is turned back onto 'achievements' in the private sphere, where they risk being assessed as failures; emotionally cold or dysfunctional. As one respondent said, 'I do object to people thinking it's out of choice – I think they view a hardness; that very much is the presentation.'

1.29 It would seem that being 'married to the job' is actually very difficult to claim as an affirmed alternative to public recognition of affective sources of identity and, it could be argued, this denigration of work and public achievements affects men as well as women today. In media and cultural discourse, the father who does not take paternity leave or who does not rush home from work for bath-time may soon be the subject of suspicion about his priorities in the same way that a mother who demonstrates 'too much' commitment to her career may be viewed as sacrificing her children's well-being.

1.30 In past studies, singleness has been seen as a problematic state because it defies the norms of femininity – marriage and motherhood. In Anne Byrne's study, older single women feel that they are perceived as unwomanly. But this does not seem such an issue for the women of this sample. Popular images of single women have become more feminised in recent years, in particular as the 'ball-breaking' career woman has receded as a popular icon. The term 'single girl', has feminine if immature connotations, as has the new term 'girlfriends' connoting platonic woman friends. Dominant cultural portrayals such as Sex and the City and Bridget Jones revel in a girlish single life – shopping, shoes, pampering, girlie chats. This has its own problems; the 'single girl' tag is more difficult to claim as women reach their forties and tends to reinforce the difficulty of being recognized as an adult. The women in this study felt in particular, that getting their parents to see them as women rather than girls was sometimes difficult, as markers of adulthood were more difficult to construct and to gain recognition for. This respondent felt that having a partner would alleviate the responsibility her parents still felt towards her:

> 'someone between me and them (her parents) would help enormously…it is not articulated …but it's an awareness of a sense of responsibility towards me which they have, which I don't want them to carry on having.'

1.31 However, as the interview progressed it became clear that this respondent's feeling of infantilisation by her parents was more than a problem of perception, she had been dependent on her parents until very recently as mental health and financial problems had periodically forced her to seek respite in her parent's home and care. She herself doubted her adulthood; 'in a funny sort of way I don't really feel like a grown up woman. And I don't know if that's to do with the fact that I'm not married'. Once again we can see that what could be read at one level as a problem of unfair and inaccurate stereotyping, once probed, is revealed as having a deeper, more individual reality.

1.32 The problem of being stuck in the past or the present, excluded from the usual life transitions was alluded to by some of the women. One, who had been married for a short period more than two decades earlier, while in her early twenties, confessed that she sometimes used 'divorced' rather than 'single' to describe herself, to convey a 'sense that she had a history'. This seemed to be motivated by concerns of self-presentation. However, she was also dissatisfied with being single and recounted how, in other circumstances, she would describe herself as 'single at the moment' because she does 'not like to think of her singleness as a permanent thing'. In a further revealing section of the interview, she described her discomfort at the point in the working day when her male colleagues 'all get telephone calls…you know, "when are you coming home?", and that can be a bit wearing'. This seemed to be a heightening of the sense of aloneness expressed earlier by the respondent who encapsulated it as 'not being the most important person in the world to anyone'.

1.33 Academically, the 'problem' of singleness has often been attributed to stigmatizing, marginalization and gender stereotyping as 'the other' to heterosexual, familied society. The interviews cited here, although small in number, raise questions of this framework of understanding. They suggest a need for further research into the effects on the single category of the destabilization of traditional gender and family identities. Understanding contemporary single womanhood requires that sufficient regard is given to the significant changes in the meanings attached to marriage and motherhood, categories intrinsically bound up with singleness.

1.34 Reynolds and Wetherall state that 'there has been little investigation…of the ways in which women defined as single respond to and work with the typical constructions of their identity available in the public arena' (Reynolds and Wetherall, 2003: 490). While this is undoubtedly true and as stated above, there is a

need to explore contemporary single identity, the experiences of singleness elicited from this sample suggest that there is an additional level of experience to be explored which may shed light on the interaction between 'identity work' and a more internal sense of self. Accounts which attempt to construct a more positive identity for single womanhood have tended to gloss over what may be a deeper reality to contemporary singleness that is problematic, ambivalent and much less easy to embrace as a positive 'lifestyle'. Issues of intimacy, care and transitional experiences seem to be evident amongst a group predicted to become more numerous in the future; single, childless women who do not feel that they have actively chosen to be either of these things.

Notes

[1]Two respondents had been married for a short period in their early twenties.

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